

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was held on 26 April 2022.

PRESENT: Councillor Davison (Chair); Councillors: Hellaoui, Nugent, Uddin, J Walker and Wilson.

OFFICERS: C Breheny, S Butcher, J Dixon, G Field and M Walker.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Higgins and Mawston.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

MINUTES – 21 MARCH 2022

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 21 March 2022 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

DRAFT FINAL REPORT – LOCALITY WORKING FROM A CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERSPECTIVE

The Panel was asked to consider the Draft Final Report on its review 'Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective, a copy of which was circulated prior to the meeting.

In relation to the report, the following queries were raised:-

- Page 6, paragraph 35 – it was queried how many residents had completed the surveys referred to. The Head of Stronger Communities advised that several surveys were conducted at different points in time and that numbers would vary, however, this information could be provided to the Panel.
- Page 10, paragraph 58 – reference was made to the views of early help practitioners that there were not enough workers to meet demand and it was queried whether that was still the case. The Executive Director stated she was mindful of limitations on staff but did not feel that demand had risen to increase caseloads excessively.
- Page 11, paragraph 62 – reference was made to the statement that based on the information provided to the Panel, it appeared that early help was not as successful in Newport as it was in North Ormesby. The Executive Director advised that at the time the information was provided to the Panel it was correct, however, things had moved on since November and she was not aware of this level of disparity now.

Proposed conclusions were circulated to Members prior to the meeting and were agreed as follows:-

- a) The Panel feels that, despite some delays mainly due to the pandemic, the locality working pilot programmes in Newport and North Ormesby are working well and are making good progress.
- b) It notes that the locality model has had a positive impact in both areas, including:-
 - a reduction in anti-social behaviour and crime.
 - a significant increase in the number of residents who report feeling safer, both during the day and at night.
 - an increase in the number of people who state they intend to continue living in the area for longer

- Noticeable improvements in the physical environment.
- c) During its review, the Panel spoke to a wide range of services and organisations involved in locality working. It appears that the concept of locality working is having a positive impact in general and more specifically on children and families living in the localities. The majority of partners feel that the multi-agency approach is beneficial and has improved working relationships and dialogue between partners and the community resulting in positive outcomes. However, the Panel found some instances where partners are less aware of the locality model and did not have full awareness of all the partners involved. For example, a mixed report from primary schools in the areas – with Newport reporting a positive impact through locality working - particularly in relation to Early Help and Neighbourhood Safety – and North Ormesby reporting a lack of awareness of the model. The Panel has since received reassurance from the Director of Children's Services that awareness of the model in North Ormesby has been improved.
 - d) Both Newport and North Ormesby have some of the highest rates in Middlesbrough for self-harm and drug and alcohol related hospital admissions and ambulance pick-ups, high levels of racially motivated crime, violent crime and anti-social behaviour. All of these issues can impact on the health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. Whilst, the Panel acknowledges that Public Health colleagues form part of the locality model and play a vital role, it feels stronger links need to be made with the Primary Care Network (particularly local GP surgeries in the areas) and acute health services such as mental health providers, midwife and health visiting services, to ensure two-way communication of information.
 - e) The Panel is encouraged to hear all of the positive work ongoing within both localities and welcomes the involvement of external voluntary and community organisations and feels that they should be kept fully informed and invited to appropriate locality meetings within the areas. All partners should ensure that the right support is available to those who need it, without duplication.
 - f) The Panel welcomes the concept of locality based working and supports its continuation within Newport and North Ormesby and is supportive of the locality working model being rolled out to other areas of the town where it is identified there is a priority need based on analysis of demand and community consultation.
 - g) There are good governance structures in place with regular operational and strategic level meetings to discuss issues and progress which are well attended by relevant representatives and actioned appropriately.
 - h) A range of relevant Action Plans have been established in both localities, including for Children's Services, and these are monitored appropriately. Each Action Plan has smart targets linked to the Performance Management Framework indicators which are used to monitor impact and progress on a regular basis.
 - i) The Panel recognises that the needs of each locality are, and will be, different and that this may result in involvement of various different organisations to suit the needs of each particular locality, however, it considers that all statutory partners are constant and have a vital role to play in any locality and should be fully involved in any locality working programmes.
 - j) With specific regard to Children's Services, the Panel feels reassured that Social Worker capacity has been increased via the establishment of a single team of Social Workers who will be allocated cases from the two localities.
 - k) Whilst Early Help Practitioners are positive about locality working and feel that the concept works, they have stated they do not feel there are sufficient numbers of Practitioners assigned to the localities to cope with demand.
 - l) The Panel notes that between June 2020 and September 2021, Early Help work in North Ormesby increased significantly and this is to be welcomed as it means more families are being

helped at an earlier stage - before statutory interventions are required. During the same period, Children in Need cases reduced significantly, Child Protection cases have increased slightly, as have the number of Children Looked After, but are relatively stable. In Newport, in June 2020 levels of Early Help support were quite high, reducing slightly by September 2021, showing Early Help is relatively stable in Newport. Between June 2020 and September 2021, the numbers of Children in Need remain quite high and there was a 5% increase in the numbers of children becoming looked after. Based on the information provided to the Panel, this suggests that Early Help is working well across both localities but in terms of children's social care, this appears to be working more successfully in North Ormesby.

- m) In terms of school readiness, impact data provided to the Panel shows that, through a multi-agency approach, the number of families reached has significantly increased from 2020 to 2021 across all three children's centres accessible to families within Newport and North Ormesby.

The Panel discussed the proposed recommendations which had also been circulated to Members prior to the meeting. An amendment was suggested to recommendation c) and it was agreed that the final wording would be circulated to Panel Members for final comment. Subsequently, the following recommendations were agreed for inclusion in the Final Report:-

- a) The Panel supports the continuation of Locality Working in both Newport and North Ormesby and further supports the roll-out of the model to other areas of the town based on priority need, to be determined through demand analysis, community surveys and led by the evaluation report for consideration by the Executive.
- b) In supporting the Locality Working model in Middlesbrough, the Panel recommends that discussions with senior managers and directors of finance within all public sector partner organisations takes place with a view to appropriately and proportionately funding each locality working area to ensure sufficient staffing allocations to meet demand. The Panel would further recommend that appropriate core structures are in place within the locality teams to ensure that Neighbourhood Managers are fully supported and deputised for during periods of absence/holidays.
- c) The Panel acknowledges the high numbers of early help cases in both Newport and North Ormesby and notes the views of the Early Help Practitioners that they feel there are not enough practitioners to meet demand. The Panel therefore recommends that, subject to further analysis, consideration be given to the number of Early Help workers allocated to each area.
- d) The Panel notes the impact data in respect of Children's Social Care Services within the localities and that the number of children looked after remains high. The Panel acknowledges that, whilst social workers have been in place for some time in the locality areas, they have only fairly recently been moved into one team to ensure consistency of approach and management oversight. The Panel, therefore, recommends that impact continues to be monitored and reported to the Panel in six months' time.
- e) That Early Help Practitioners and the Social Workers be introduced to appropriate staff within each of the areas' schools to build up relationships and discuss children/families requiring support through regular dialogue and that the work of the locality teams is promoted and regularly discussed with school leadership teams.
- f) That school readiness and children's centre registrations continue to be monitored and promoted in a range of languages to maximise reach and take up of nursery places to ensure that children are ready for school to optimise their learning potential.

- g) That relevant community and voluntary organisations, including schools, are equally involved in the locality teams and that appropriate information sharing takes place to ensure:
- i) That access to a 'signposting directory' of all services and organisations available to support families within the localities is available to all partners via the Neighbourhood Manager/a designated co-ordinator.
 - ii) That programmes of activities and events designed to support children and families are planned, discussed and co-ordinated in advance between partners within the localities to avoid unnecessary duplication and ensure those who need help and support receive it. (For example, that the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) provision is co-ordinated in conjunction with Feast of Fun activity to maximise appropriate take-up and avoid duplication).
- h) That stronger links are made, through Public Health colleagues if and where appropriate, between primary care and acute care providers including GPs, mental health provision, midwife and health visiting services with improved referral pathways to Early Help and Children's Social Care Services where appropriate.
- i) Ensure that all partners are familiar with Middlesbrough's threshold of need document when making referrals to children's social care to improve the quality of referrals and ensure that the correct level of support can be determined and provided as quickly as possible and that the document be readily accessible via the Neighbourhood Manager/designated Co-ordinator.
- j) The Panel considers that Locality Working in Middlesbrough should be better promoted and clearly branded to ensure that all partners, and the community, are aware of how it operates, who is involved and how to make contact. The Wigan Deal is a good example of this where each priority area has an 'our part' (the borough's public sector organisations and partners) and a 'your part' (residents) so that the principles of working together to achieve joint ambitions is realised with each partner aware of what is expected of them.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the proposed conclusions, as set out above, be included in the Final Report.
2. That the proposed recommendations, following agreement to the amendment to recommendation c), as set out above, be included in the Final Report.
3. That the Final Report on Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 11 May 2022 for consideration.

DRAFT FINAL REPORT – SUFFICIENCY AND PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE)

The Panel was asked to consider the Draft Final Report on its review 'Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care)', a copy of which was circulated prior to the meeting. In addition, an Addendum report, updating on the key points within the main report, was also submitted.

Proposed conclusions were circulated to Members prior to the meeting and were agreed as follows:-

- a) The Panel wishes to acknowledge that due to the need for Children's Services to improve with urgency and pace, significant progress has been made since the Panel commenced its review. This is supported by the Department for Education's Children's Commissioner recommending

that Children's Services in Middlesbrough no longer required oversight by the Commissioner and was endorsed by the Minister for Children and Families in July 2021.

- b) The Panel also acknowledges that improvements were made despite significant demand on services coupled with the Covid pandemic which called for alternative and inventive ways of working.
- c) The Panel recognises that whilst the number of children looked after in Middlesbrough remains high, it has significantly reduced – with a 19.5% reduction during the period November 2020 to November 2021.
- d) The Panel feels reassured that since the start of its review, significant improvements have been made across Children's Services in Middlesbrough, with the following areas most recently noted as having improved by Ofsted:-
- Senior managers are realistic and know their service – they are aware of progress and areas that still require improvement.
 - Social Worker caseloads have begun to reduce.
 - There is stronger practice in relation to immediate safeguarding concerns and in support provision for children in need where serious concerns exist and they are on the 'edge of care'.
 - Social Workers are enthusiastic and know their children and families well and are committed to improving their lives.
- e) The Panel also notes positive progress has been made in the following areas:-
- An increase in the numbers of children being adopted, where it is in their best interests, with more Middlesbrough children being adopted than from any other Tees Valley local authority in the last 12 months up to December 2021. Parallel planning has been improved between Middlesbrough's fostering service and Adoption Tees Valley. In addition, Adoption Tees Valley continues to promote interest in adopting through continuous recruitment events managed by a dedicated Marketing Officer.
 - A significant reduction in the number of children living in connected carer placements and an increase in the number of children whose permanency has been secured via Special Guardianship orders.
 - A 50% reduction in the number of children residing in Placements with Parents during the 12 month period to August 2021.
 - A significant reduction in external residential placements in the six months up to December 2021.
 - An increase in young people being placed in Middlesbrough residential provision.
 - An increase in the use of in-house foster care placements as opposed to Independent Foster Agency placements.
- f) The Panel is aware that there are areas of the service that require further development and is keen to ensure it is kept updated on progress.
- g) The Panel heard that Children's Services has implemented a sophisticated data analysis package to monitor demand, impact and trends and to support improved performance reporting and social work practice. A raft of Performance Management Framework indicators are in place and appropriate scorecards are being developed by the Service Area and Children's Services Improvement Advisor, with input from the relevant Chairs, for use by this Scrutiny Panel, the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Parenting Board for governance and assurance purposes. The Service has also developed a set of seven proxy indicators with indicative targets based on statistical neighbour averages with the ambition of achieving the statistical neighbour average for children looked after over the next three years.

- h) The Panel recognises that the Futures for Families Service has been successful in providing support for young people on the edge of care and has prevented 37 young people becoming looked after. The service also provides support to fragile placements and placement stability has improved.
- i) The Panel notes that there have been improvements in practice with consistently high numbers of children looked after being seen by social workers; improved management oversight of cases; consistently high (99%) numbers of children looked after having a recorded Personal Education Plan and more than 90% of children looked after health assessments being carried out. The Panel notes that an area for improvement is dental assessments where 66% of children looked after have had an assessment in the last 12 months, however, this has also been impacted by Covid.
- j) The Panel is aware of the need to increase the number of Middlesbrough foster carers in order to provide sufficient local placements for Middlesbrough children and acknowledges that in-house capacity has been increased due to continued foster carer recruitment drives and a range of initiatives including managed social work teams (Innovate) specifically working to: bring children from expensive external placements back to Middlesbrough; reduce the number of children placed with parents on care orders (where safe to do so); progressing plans for Special Guardianship where children live with a connected persons carer; and ensuring support is provided for children living with foster carers where the placement is at risk of breaking down. This work has realised significant cost reductions. The Panel acknowledges that there are specific groups of young people for whom more specialised carers/placements are required including older children/teens, parent and baby placements, sibling groups, children with complex needs and/or disabilities, children from minority ethnic groups and that these children can wait longer for permanent homes.
- k) A Corporate Parenting Strategy has been devised and adopted which includes a Permanency Strategy and Sufficiency Strategic sitting within it. Each strategy was shaped by input from children and young people in Middlesbrough.
- l) The Panel heard that Children's Services had developed a social work practice model 'Children and Relationships First', developed with the workforce. This was supported by the recently established Centre for Practice Excellence which, as well as supporting the practice model, provides co-ordination to driving innovation and best practice across the whole system of support for children and young people and offers tools and resources to support the practice model, workforce development, quality assurance arrangements and opportunities to share and develop best practice.
- m) The Panel recognises the excellent work being undertaken by Pause, a national charity working with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat removals of children from their care. Pause offers an intensive support programme with the aim of breaking the cycle of repeat removals by supporting women to tackle destructive patterns of behaviour and to develop new skills and responses to create a positive future. Pause is currently working with 11 women in Middlesbrough.
- n) In terms of improving perceptions of children in care, the Panel is encouraged to learn that increased engagement is taking place with children in care and care leavers through Participation People and is supportive of this being developed going forward.

The Panel discussed the proposed recommendations which had also been circulated to Members prior to the meeting and amendments were suggested to recommendations a), b), c), d), f), h), i), l), m) and q) and also the removal of number n). It was agreed that the final wording would be circulated to Panel Members for final comment. Subsequently, the following recommendations were agreed for inclusion in the Final Report:-

- a) The Panel supports the sustained efforts being made to reduce the number of children looked after in Middlesbrough in line with our regional statistical neighbours and that

the performance scorecard being reported to LMT on a six-weekly basis in relation to this indicator be shared with the Panel on a quarterly basis.

- b) The Panel notes the high percentage of children (15.1%) who become looked after at birth and recommends that a specific piece of work be undertaken to establish why this is the case and that this work includes performance information and exploration of whether further interventions can be put in place to reduce this figure. If appropriate, a set of performance indicators should be identified to monitor improvement over the next year in the first instance.
- c) That analysis be undertaken to identify any potential gaps in child protection provision in the more ethnically diverse wards and further work be undertaken to provide assurance that the statistical under representation/over representation of children of different ethnicities being looked after by the local authority aligns with the level of need amongst these groups.
- d) That work is undertaken to identify how the provision of Early Help can be increased in North Ormesby, (subject to further analysis and if this remains appropriate), and that the recommendations put forward by this Panel in its Final Report on 'Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective' regarding further assessment of demand and the number of Early Help workers assigned to the areas, be taken forward.
- e) That the sustained efforts to increase the number of children being placed in an in-house foster placement be continued and that the targets established remain a key priority indicator for the service and performance be regularly reported to the Panel.
- f) The Panel appreciates the challenges faced by the service in relation to the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers and the continuous efforts being made to increase in-house Foster Carer provision. It is recommended that additional feedback is sought from Foster Carers leaving Middlesbrough's Fostering Service to ensure that the information gained through the satisfaction surveys is fully utilised to focus on continuing improvement in this area.
- g) The Panel notes that there is currently very little advertising across the town to indicate that Middlesbrough Council needs and wants more people to become in-house foster carers. The Panel recommends that the work to increase the number of carers continues with pace and focus on additional advertising and marketing which should be analysed to improve awareness of the continuous need for more people to become in-house foster carers.
- h) The Panel appreciates that an essential strand to improving sufficiency is to continue to improve social work practice. It is acknowledged that numerous initiatives have been put in place to achieve this including the introduction of a Social Work Practice Model, a new Centre for Practice Excellence, the development of the Corporate Parenting Strategy, the work undertaken by the Future for Families Team, the commissioning of Innovate Teams and the effectiveness of the PAUSE project. However, whilst the Panel acknowledges improvements in the reduction of the use of Connected Carer Placements and Placements with Parents, it remains an area for improvement, and it is recommended that performance data is regularly presented to the panel in respect of these elements.
- i) The Panel recognises that particular progress has been made in strengthening the auditing process which provides a wide and in-depth coverage of the quality of

services, however, a small proportion of social work practice continues to be identified as 'inadequate' through the audits. Whilst the Panel notes the continuing reduction in 'inadequate' practice, it recommends that increased focus is placed on addressing poor quality practice through increased management oversight, support, guidance and training identified as appropriate for individuals, as set out in the Children's Services improvement plan.

- j) The Panel would also reinforce that the day to day lived experience of the child should be at the heart of all social work practice and that this should be a key feature of learning and development to improve practice and a key part of the auditing process.
- k) That the improvement in the number of children being placed for adoption over the period 2018/19 (17) to 2020/21 (22) be continued alongside the improved focus on permanency planning.
- l) That progress against the set of seven proxy indicators with indicative targets based on statistical neighbour averages be reported to the panel and OSB on a quarterly basis.
- m) That mandatory training to provide a basic awareness of the Children's Social Care system, including information regarding key terms and phrases, be provided to all Council staff and Elected Members through the Middlesbrough Learns platform and that this be completed on an annual basis.
- n) That the local authority considers the use of certain terminology and acronyms that can be perceived as negative in relation to children in care/care leavers and that this be considered in conjunction with the young people themselves via the Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Forum and other participation routes.
- o) That the Participation Officer be asked to undertake a piece of work with children in care and care leavers through the various forums that have been established, to obtain their views around their experiences of the care system, what works well, what does not work well and to present their findings to the Panel and the Corporate Parenting Board.
- p) That opportunities are maximised to continually gather the views of children and young people in care, care leavers and their carers that can be used to shape and drive service improvement within the system.

AGREED as follows:-

- 1) That the proposed conclusions, as set out above, be included in the Final Report.
- 2) That the proposed recommendations, following the suggested amendments as discussed and following circulation to the Panel for agreement, and as set out above, be included in the Final Report.
- 3) That the Final Report on Sufficiency and Permanency (Perceptions of Children in Care) be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 11 May 2022 for consideration.

COVID RECOVERY IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Executive Director of Children's Services advised that there were currently no issues with availability of staff within children's social care. There had been some challenges around a Covid breakout within Holly Lodge residential home, however, this was now receding and the Service as a whole was not facing any significant demand.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided the Panel with a verbal update in relation to the business conducted by the Overview and Scrutiny Board on 23 March 2022, namely:-

- Executive forward work programme.
- Executive Member Update – Councillor Cooper, Executive Member for Environment and Finance and Governance.
- Chief Executive Update.
- Scrutiny Panels' Chair's Updates.
- Town Centre Update
- Next OSB meeting – Wed, 27 April 2022 at 10.00am

The Chair announced that this was the Scrutiny Panel's final meeting of the 2021/22 Municipal Year and thanked Members for their valuable contribution throughout the year.

NOTED